Reconsidering value perspectives in child welfare

Abstract

This article offers a conceptually informed review of current trends in child welfare policy, drawing on the 'value perspectives' typology originally formulated by Fox Harding. The article introduces the typology and provides examples of its previous application. It goes on to consider the relationship between alternative value positions and the potential conflicts associated with these, before moving on to consider contemporary issues in children's policy and practice. Recent trends towards an increasing emphasis on adoption and in parallel a greater reliance on authoritarian measures to protect children and promote responsible parenting are discussed; as are the relative weakening of policy commitments to the promotion of children's rights or investment in services to provide support to families. These developments viewed in combination can thus be viewed as representing a systemic shift away from welfare and rights-based approaches in child welfare to those which rely on measures grounded in the authoritative exercise of state power, from above. This, the article concludes, can be associated with a progressive degradation of the principles of partnership and collaboration which are viewed as desirable by many of those directly engaged in working with children and families.

Value perspectives

Child welfare policy

Laissez-faire

Child protectionism

Family support

Children's rights

Reconsidering value perspectives in child welfare

Changing positions: the impact of ideology on children's service provision

This article aims to revisit and reconsider prior conceptualisations of distinctive value positions in child welfare (Fox Harding, 1991; 1997; Smith, 2005), in light of contemporary developments informing child care policy. The article builds on Fox Harding's earlier argument that there were a number of coherent value positions which could be said to constitute the 'field' (Bourdieu, 1990) of child welfare. This argument in turn incorporated the assumption that it is possible to identify and delineate a degree of ideological coherence in each of these 'positions' and that these in turn have direct and distinctive consequences in terms of the decisions and actions of those who play an active part in delivering child welfare in practice. Additionally, it might be suggested that to the extent that any of these positions achieved a state of dominance, then it might also take on hegemonic functions, establishing both normative and evidential standards against which policies, service goals and practices could be judged. Here, we enter the murky terrain of ruling paradigms and hermeneutic circles. Thus, in the case of adoption, for example, to which we shall return more than once, once its underlying rationale is established success criteria may accordingly come to be defined in terms of whether or not placements are made effectively, rather than whether or not this is the most beneficial outcome in terms of the well-being of children, individually or collectively.

The 'value perspectives' framework developed by Fox Harding (1997) originally set out four distinctive ideological positions in relation to child welfare, which were also associated with specific organisations and policy platforms which they typically espoused. The positions were respectively depicted in 'ideal type' form as: laissez-faire; family support; child protectionist and children's rights. Each of these, in turn, was consequentially associated with distinctive views about how children's services should be organised and delivered; and, particularly what should be the underlying goals of intervention with children and families, and how children's best interests could be served. Although generating considerable interest at the time they were formulated, the value perspectives have not been further explored for some time. However, there is perhaps some justification for revisiting them in the current context, when children's policy has once again been pushed into the foreground, arguably at the expense of 'family policy', it could be noted with some irony; and it certainly appears that some of the intervention strategies currently in place and under consideration are strongly associated with certain of the four ideological positions outlined here.

I should perhaps point out here that the focus of this article is on recent and current developments in child welfare in England and wales, principally, albeit these experiences undoubtedly resonate elsewhere.

Of particular contemporary relevance are recent changes in adoption policy and practice and the growing pressure on child protection services reflected in increasing numbers of referrals and consequential interventions; as well as other high profile initiatives such as the Troubled Families programme. Introduced with much fanfare in 2012 by the Prime Minister at the time, David Cameron, the Troubled Families programme comprised a substantial package of investment in projects implemented by local authorities to 'turn round' the lives of the 120,000 families claimed to be experiencing at least three from a list of specified problems, such as worklessness, criminality or non-attendance at school .

All these developments suggest an active renegotiation of the terrain of children's services, with potentially significant outcomes, for individual children and their families on one level; and, collectively for the structure and operation of child welfare practices in general. According to the analytical framework initially set out by Fox Harding, of course, these changes also imply an active process of contestation and realignment of preferred value positions and practice orientations.

At this point, I am interested in responding to the new analytical challenges represented by these recognisable contemporary developments in and between policy and practice, with the consequent implications for: a) restructuring the ways we view and approach child care interventions in a material sense; and, b) the ideological readjustments that might be associated with these changes.

Value perspectives: Fox Harding

The typology developed by Fox Harding originated with that author's concerns about an apparently developing polarisation between 'two value positions' (Fox, 1982) in child care law and practice. This division was essentially identified with those who favoured a more active and interventionist role on the part of the state in protecting children on one side; and those who favoured a policy approach geared towards supporting and enabling families on the other. Subsequently, Fox Harding developed the typology further to accommodate two additional value positions which were not perhaps so directly involved in arguments between the opposing positions principally held and debated by professional child welfare agencies and their practitioners. These further positions were typified as 'laissez-faire' and 'children's rights', both of which, in different ways could be said to highlight the interests of children and families quite distinctly from questions of intervention and service provision. For proponents of the 'laissez-faire' position, safeguarding the independence and integrity of the family is the most important guarantor of a positive upbringing for children, although this is also linked to a belief in decisive intervention to preclude unacceptable parenting (by means of adoption, for example); whilst for those advocating a children's rights agenda, putting children and their voices first is similarly fundamental to ensuring their well-being.

In operationalising the application of the typology, Fox Harding (1991; 1997) suggested that it could be effectively applied to different historical phases in the development of child welfare policies and practice; and that, equally, geographical variations in the strength and influence of different perspectives could similarly be discerned. Thus, for example, Victorian Britain might fairly readily be associated with a form of patriarchal, laissez-faire approach to the family, where the role of the state in intervening in the male-dominated domestic sphere is seen to be extremely limited. As Fox Harding (1991, p. 43) noted, this was highlighted by the extent and ferocity of the opposition to any small change in the law which seemed to limit the independence of the family, or constrain the dominant position of men within it.

By contrast, Fox Harding (1991, p. 91) associates the period in the 1970s following the death of Maria Colwell and the subsequent inquiry with the emergence and legitimisation of a strongly interventionist role for the state. In this context, no aspect of family life could be considered sacrosanct, given that children's safety and well-being could not be guaranteed in the family setting. Here the role of state-sponsored professional experts, including social workers, in monitoring and intervening to promote children's safety and well-being perhaps reached its zenith, before later

coming under rigorous scrutiny and criticism. The Children Act 1975, and associated guidance on safeguarding children, explicitly cemented a protectionist model of intervention at the forefront of child welfare policy, perhaps for the first time in the modern era.

In terms of geographical variations, Fox Harding (1991, p. 189) identifies Norway as a pioneer in children's rights, with that country establishing a commissioner for children in 1981, with a wide remit to promote and protect the rights of children to play a key part in influencing decisions about their care and upbringing – the countries of the UK, by contrast, did not begin to establish similar roles until some 20 years later. Meanwhile, Australia is identified (Fox Harding, 1991, p. 143) as a country where family support and the development of effective services to assist parents to care for their children became central policy goals in the 1970s, just as the UK was becoming more 'protectionist'.

Reflecting on the apparent divergences between different perspectives, Fox Harding (1991) also acknowledges that they have common ground in some respects, and that it is equally difficult to find an absolutely pure form of any particular perspective in the complex and changing real world environment. So, the role of the state is viewed as positive and active by supporters of both the family rights/support perspective and child protectionists, while the other positions would see the state more as the guarantor of children's interests, rather than routinely engaging in direct interventions to promote children's well-being. On the other hand, the role of state in exercising social control and determining family arrangements in children's interests is stronger in the laissez-faire and protectionist perspectives than it is in the others, where families and/or children are ascribed the final say in such matters.

Fox Harding (1991, p. 230) also acknowledges that in practice there are likely to be continuing conflicts and accommodations between perspectives, and she concludes her analysis by suggesting that it is possible to think either in terms of continuing and unresolved 'conflict' between perspectives; or, on the other hand, that the critical goal for practice should be to achieve an increasingly effective basis for compromise. The overarching objective for child care policy should be: 'not simply a redistribution of muddle but a genuinely more effective balance correcting tendencies both to over- and under-react, while helping parents and children as a unit where it is appropriate to do so' (Fox Harding, 1991, p. 231).

Negotiating differences: value perspectives in tension

The present author drew on Fox Harding's typology (Smith, 2005) in order to explore the concrete workings of value positions in more detail, and considering the processes by which the different perspectives might work out their differences and commonalities in variable contexts. A number of (then) existing children's and family organisations, all in the voluntary sector, each of which could be identified with one of the value perspectives, were utilised as the embodiment of the positional arguments outlined in relation to the typology.

Four organisations (Family Rights Group, Children's Legal Centre, Parents Against Injustice (PAin) and NSPCC) were identified as potential 'ideal type' exemplifications of the four value positions, and through an evaluation of their practices, attitudes and self-representation, it was possible to

conclude that, for the most part, they could be distinguished in all these respects as demonstrating distinctive, and to some extent conflicting practice orientations. Of course, this may then present particular problems and challenges when differing perspectives are held and articulated when addressing specific child welfare, where risk and need may be at issue, for example. So, for instance, in the case of children refusing treatment for serious health conditions, or refusing to eat in extreme cases of anorexia, arguments are made for over-riding their *'rights'* to do so in favour of their best interests, and thus *'protect'* them from harm (Shaw, 2001, p. 156).

As far as the four organisations were concerned, their differences could be linked to specific conflicts, as in the case of PAin which acted as a rallying point for those who argued, sometimes from personal experience, that the state's use of its powers to intervene in family life in the name of child protection was frequently misused or excessive – as was claimed to be the case in the much cited examples of Cleveland and Rochdale in the late 1980s/early 1990s (Crane, 2015). Of particular interest, here, are the continuities and dissonances between perspectives which are grounded in operational decisions and practices, as well as in wider political debates within and beyond the field of child welfare – notably concerning the perennial and thorny question of the extent to which the state should be entitled to cross the threshold into the private realm of the family, and under what conditions (Barrett and McIntosh, 1991; Mount 1992).

Each of the four organisations considered could be seen to have developed its own rationale and claims to legitimacy to provide a reasoned and justifiable basis for its activities and pronouncements. At the same time, though, as articulating clearly distinctive arguments, they could also be seen to demonstrate commonalities and the potential for alliance-building on the basis of these shared understandings, in the same way that Fox Harding had previously suggested. This was apparent, for instance, in the tentative recognition of common ground between the Family Rights Group and Parents Against Injustice in relation to the autonomy of the family, and its capacity to manage its own affairs, independently of controlling measures exercised by state agencies. Indeed, Fox Harding (1997) initially associated PAin with the 'birth family defender' perspective. However, although FRG could be similarly critical of 'unsympathetic' and heavy handed intervention by social services departments (Smith, 2005, p. 93), it also took a much more positive view of the potential for collaboration between more supportive agencies and families themselves. Here the fault line lay between interventionist and non-interventionist viewpoints.

At the same time, and in common with Fox Harding, the present author also recognised the contingent nature of alliances and, indeed, conflicts between those holding alternative positions. These were clearly borne out in individual cases, but they could also be discerned in the shifting sands of wider changes in the policy and political arenas. Thus, for example, the emergence of a strong neo-liberal government in the late 1970s/early 1980s provided fertile ground for those who wanted to promote 'family values', a principle which appears to bring the different pro-family perspectives into alignment, whilst also exposing their differences. Pejorative attitudes towards non-traditional families, such as those articulated by Murray (1996) as a social commentator, and political figures including Peter Lilley, sometime Secretary of State for Social Security, revealed the key point of divergence between proponents of the laissez-faire perspective and those who were advocates for the social rights of families, irrespective of their composition. Lilley announced at his party's annual conference that he had a 'little list' of people whose behaviour he considered

unacceptable and which constituted grounds for withdrawing state support, including some caricatured examples of non-conforming and supposedly 'irresponsible' parenthood.

Back to the present?

On the basis of these earlier insights, the aim of this article is now to move on to reconsider the field of child welfare and child care practice with a view to providing a contemporary perspective on the dynamics of alignment and re-alignment between the perspectives outlined, and articulating some observations on the current state of play. We will thus consider a number of key developments which offer some clues as to the direction of travel and how this is itself reflective of wider ideological shifts and material forces which themselves influence the way we think about policy and practice in iterative fashion. In relation to the four value positions, these can be identified along the following lines:

- The re-emergence of adoption as a preferred outcome (*laissez faire*);
- The increased level of activity in child protection (*child protectionist*);
- The decline in family support services (*family support*); and
- The de-emphasis of children's rights (*children's rights*).

The re-emergence of adoption and decisive intervention

It is quite clear that there has been a renewed emphasis on adoption as a desired outcome for children in the care system in recent years. And, indeed, it can be argued that this also represents an increased readiness to consider cutting children off from birth families in order to promote what are seen as beneficial outcomes, in much the same way as originally articulated by Goldstein et al (1973, p. 101). Thus, as they put it, where clear and robust evidence of irretrievable parental failure is available, an alternative placement such as adoption which is 'unconditional and final' must be found as quickly as possible, in the interests of permanence and security.

Adoption was forcefully endorsed by the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, on a number of occasions throughout his tenure (Sunday Times, May 15th, 2016, for example). Indeed, he made several interventions into the child welfare policy arena which appeared to position it as his favoured outcome for children unable to continue living with their birth parents. Support for this agenda was earlier provided in a report commissioned by government, on the benefits and constraints on pursuing adoption through statutory agencies (Narey, 2011).

Here, too, there was an indication of the changing balance between value positions, as adoption was consistently promoted as a more positive option for children than continuing support for birth families. The emergence, for example, of parallel planning for children may have sought to achieve a balanced approach, but its consequences may well have been to divert attention, resources and effort from supporting birth parents, and at the same time conveying the message to them that they were not trusted to provide continuing care for their children (Luckock and Broadhurst, 2013).

Of course, in a time of financial constraint and service reductions, adoption holds other attractions, too. As a permanent, family-based solution to children's long-term needs it appears to offer a much

less costly option than, say, extended programmes of family support or accommodation of children in residential care.

Recent trends suggest that this kind of strong policy endorsement does have a direct impact on outcomes, too (Department for Education, 2016a). Despite a decline from a peak in 2014-2015, the number of looked after children in England who were adopted in 2015-16 stood at 4,690, over 50% higher than the 2010-11 figure (3,100). At the same time, the average age of looked after children being adopted has declined, from which one can infer tentatively that there is an increasing emphasis on decisive early intervention and a decline in commitment to continuing efforts to support children in birth families.

It is interesting, too, to note that as adoption has taken on a more prominent role, it has also gained affirmation through the accumulation of a largely confirmatory research base (eg, Thomas, 2013). This body of support has developed not simply through the selective publication of supportive findings, but also through the agenda-setting process, which determines what research questions are contextually valuable and, indeed, how they are to be asked. Here, we find further support for the argument that legitimacy is secured at least in part through the 'marshalling' of a repertoire of rationalisations to secure consent for what is essentially a normative position.

Thus, in sum, we can see that the accumulation of arguments, evidence and resources behind the project of positioning adoption as effectively the preferred option for meeting children's long-term needs comes to represent an active endorsement of the 'laissez-faire' argument in favour of the free-standing, self-sufficient, morally competent family model. Notably, though, this does not necessarily represent an endorsement of the biological family, with perhaps equally significant implications for debates about the factors associated with family 'failure'; in the sense of genetic shortcomings or 'cycles' of inadequate socialisation and their perceived associations with parenting abilities and childhood disadvantage.

Child protection: discipline and punish?

At the same time as we have witnessed an upsurge in enthusiasm for adoption as a solution to childhood problems, so, too, has contemporary experience suggested an increasing dependence on statutory child protection measures to prevent children being harmed. Here, too, the available figures suggest a rapid upsurge in the use of measures to safeguard children, including the use of care proceedings and placements of children outside the family home (Zayed and Harker, 2015). By the latter half of 2016, it was announced that the number of child care cases going through the family courts in England and Wales had doubled since 2009:

> The family court service in England and Wales is facing a "clear and imminent crisis" because of a sustained increase in the number of child care cases, its most senior judge has said. (The Guardian, 20 Sept, 2016)

At the same time, as noted in the annual returns of the Department for Education (2016a), the number of children 'looked after' has increased steadily over the last eight years [to March 2016]' (Department for Education, 2016a, p. 1), and by 31st March 2016 there were 70,440 looked after children in England, an increase of 3,370 (5%) on 2012.

As Fox Harding's (1991) model suggests, child protection measures are associated with an authoritative, perhaps authoritarian, role for the state and its agents. In this respect, a protectionist approach to intervention shows a clear affinity to the laissez-faire perspective. Both are advocates of what might be termed the 'strong state' (Gamble, 1988). They differ, though, to the extent that they favour an active and continuing role for the state in shaping the lives of children and their carers. In the contemporary era, too, this more interventionist view of the role of agencies and practitioners is also associated with greater cost and higher demands on the time of stretched services. So, although external circumstances may well be contributing to service pressures, at the same time these very services are themselves constrained in their capacity to respond.

So, as far as the protectionist perspective is concerned, these tensions indicate the need for a strategic and pragmatic realignment on the part of statutory services, purely in the interests of maintaining the capacity to function in their designated role. We would thus expect those who operate from this perspective to have had to make a number of adaptations. Firstly, and consistently with the push to promote adoption already noted, there appears to be a form of rational alignment between the laissez-faire and protectionist positions. Adoption offers a route by which children can be offered long-term protection, whilst the need for continuing and resource-intensive state intervention is minimised, and at the same time the ideological integrity of both perspectives is maintained (Gillingham and Bromfield, 2008).

Nonetheless, when continuing intervention seems to be necessitated, the underlying resource pressures still apply. In this respect, currently, an option such as the Troubled Families programme also offers a pragmatic solution. For some, too, it might seem to find substantive support in models of social work intervention such as brief therapy and solution-focused practice. Troubled Families initiatives might appear on the face of it to be more aligned with a 'family support' model of child welfare, but when we consider its mode of delivery and the nature of the 'support' actually offered, this perception is modified. Instead, the programme is more akin to a directive measure for disciplining parents and families, rather than acting as a vehicle for delivering practical help and material resources. The idea propagated by the architect of TF that its approach should be to 'grip' families (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012) and show parents how to fulfil their expected responsibilities by adopting a 'hands on' approach seems to be quite readily equated with a disciplinary, paternalist and patriarchal model consistent with the principles of a protectionist state – and with one nation Conservatism. Are we, thus, in effect able to account for current developments in terms of a rapprochement between two long-established ideological strands within Conservative thinking?

Donzelot (1980) has previously offered helpful insights into the disciplinary project of the authoritarian state when it comes to shaping and controlling the dynamics of family life. State strategies can be seen as a form of 'tutelage' (or guidance, perhaps) which presents families with a non-negotiable rationale for adopting the desired child-rearing and domestic management behaviours desired. These in turn are designed to produce self-disciplined, compliant and productive citizens of the future. Indeed, Donzelot almost appears to provide the blueprint for the Troubled Families project. Intervention is designed: 'under the guise of a campaign against moral laxity [to create] the "tireless little" worker in opposition to the unstructured family' (Donzelot, 1980, p. 163).

<u>Supporting families – at very little cost?</u>

As we shift the ideological frame, and move on to consider the 'birth family defender' perspective, to use Fox Harding's (1997) terminology, the example of the Troubled Families initiative is certainly pertinent, not because of what it is, but because of what it does not provide. Troubled Families is essentially a vehicle for co-opting existing facilities and services to enable families to become self-sufficient and productive. The programme was certainly introduced with a flourish, supported by what appeared to be a very substantial budget and accompanying rhetoric suggesting that families would benefit directly and substantially from its largesse. Undoubtedly, there was a concerted attempt on the part of many provider agencies at local level to adopt a proactive and supportive approach to implementation – the aim was genuinely to work with families to empower them, improve their access to resources and advocate for them to reduce levels of social exclusion. Gateshead Council, for example, committed itself to a holistic and participatory approach to providing family support, according to the family's own timescale. (http://www.gateshead.gov.uk/childrenstrust/FamiliesGateshead/TheLocalContext.aspx, accessed 17th March 2017).

On the other hand, the very structure of the TF initiative and the constraints imposed as a condition of receiving funding made these objectives much harder to achieve and especially to sustain. TF was time limited, target-based, and offered on a 'one-off' basis, with a range of insubstantial administrative indicators of success (Crossley, 2015) which were supposedly able to demonstrate that families lives had been 'turned round' as a result of this form of brief and directive intervention. Importantly, and consistent with the 'state paternalist' perspective, the behavioural change indicators specified were imposed from above, rather than being negotiated and managed by families and practitioners themselves. As is well documented by now (Lambert and Crossley, 2017), these features of the programme had a clear skewing effect on practices and impacts, effectively limiting its capacity to actively and purposefully support families in any meaningful way, despite anecdotal reports of successful outcomes.

And, just as the TF programme had been introduced to a protracted fanfare and with its apparently generous budget, so local authorities and voluntary sector providers of family support services have been subject to a prolonged period of financial restraint, with the result that many existing valued services with demonstrable records of achievement have been drastically reduced in scale or withdrawn altogether. As I write this, the major provider of early years and 'preventive' children's services, 4children, has just been forced into administration (Guardian, 5th Sept 2016).

Here, too, the accompanying justificatory rhetoric is significant. We are invited to accept that past expenditure on families has been wasteful and misdirected, encouraging dependency rather than promoting autonomy and self-sufficiency.

> We know that employability and - ultimately - employment is critical to tackling the often intergenerational cycle of benefit dependency and low aspiration for families with particularly complex needs. (Department for Communities and Local Government/Department for Work & Pensions, 2013, p. 1)

Rather than being 'freed' to thrive in their own right, as the laissez-faire model would wish, families have been undermined and even disabled by being offered 'something for nothing' – their

independent, entrepreneurial spirit has been sapped. Instead, they need the challenge of being required to fend for themselves, to develop a sense of responsibility and discover the benefits of thrift and hard work. The language of structural inequality, disadvantage and poverty has no purchase in the face of this rhetoric; nor, by extension is it believed to be justified to see generalised universal spending to promote well-being as having anything to offer in the wider public interest.

Family support, then, has effectively been recast in significant contrast to its earlier incarnation in the form of well-resourced, enabling community-based models of provision, associated with the likes of children's centres and the Sure Start programme, for example. As a result, ironically, we now find proponents of 'family support' arguing against the autocratic model of intervention typically associated with the Troubled Families initiative (Featherstone et al, 2014).

What about children's rights?

Unlike the other value perspectives, it has perhaps always been the case that 'children's rights' has been less well established as a legitimate starting point for intervention in child welfare. This may seem ironic, but is certainly Fox Harding's (1997, p. 109) view: 'This value perspective may be regarded as having been somewhat more marginal to actual childcare law and policy….' Despite this observation, there have been noticeable changes in the extent to which children's rights have been able to gain a foothold in policy and practice in recent times. Indeed, there is some evidence of a growing recognition of the legitimate and independent rights of children to play a key part in decisions about their lives, perhaps triggered or amplified by the much-reported Gillick ruling of 1987; and subsequently further enhanced through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which gave impetus to a strong children's rights lobby, represented by organisations such as the Children's Rights Alliance for England, or Together in Scotland.

Consistent with these developments, distinctive models of practice emerged, with children and young people becoming more likely to be placed at (or at least nearer) the centre of decision-making processes. McLeod (2008, p. 52) offers the example of children being encouraged to chair decision-making reviews whilst in care.

In addition, there was definitely a sense of progress in moving children's rights nearer centre stage with the establishment of children's commissioners in each of the four jurisdictions of the UK (eventually).

While there may be points of divergence, and differences of emphasis, such as over children's rights to determine their own care decisions (see Daly et al, 2015, for example), there are also obvious areas of common ground between proponents of children's and family' rights', with a number of notable joint campaigns involving lobby groups promoting what could be seen as common interests – such as minimum income standards, rights to early years services, access to legal services, play, health and education provision (End Child Poverty, for example). However, both positions being grounded in ideas of rights, social justice and the promotion of well-being have experienced similar privations in the period of austerity following the banking crisis of 2008.

Macadam et al (2013), for instance, have identified a substantial reduction in advocacy services from the early days of austerity, and children's rights services are under particular threat in the sense that

they do not fulfil statutory functions. In a broader sense, too, the acknowledged decimation of the youth service has clearly limited the access of children and young people to informal sources of advice and assistance.

The Children's Rights Alliance for England (2013) also reports a continuing deficit in the recognition of children's independent rights, especially when they are subject to statutory intervention in their lives. The significant reductions in access to formal and legal remedies noted by the CRAE at that point in time were of particular concern, because: 'As Lord Neuberger has said 'rights are valueless if they cannot be realised' (CRAE, 2013, p. 1).

These concerns have been further substantiated by the parliamentary joint committee on human rights, which concluded in its report on children's rights (Human Rights Joint Committee, 2015) that:

> Children in England are experiencing the hard edge of austerity, with mounting threats to their basic human rights. The cumulative impact of cuts to services, the cost of living crisis, and changes to the welfare system, means some children in England are not having their basic needs for shelter and food met and can't access the services which are supposed to support families, while many more are not able to enjoy a fulfilled and happy childhood.[Para 86]

Similarly, there is increasing concern about the declining availability of legal assistance for children (and parents) in the judicial decision-making environment; and in this context children's independent interests and voices may well be increasingly diminished as they are elided with those of adults who have a stake in the outcome (Independent, June 1st 2013).

Elsewhere, it has been concluded that children's voices are not heard consistently in relation to specific decisions about their care, well-being or upbringing (Gallagher et al, 2012; Van Bijleveld et al, 2015). Thomas (2011) has also commented specifically on the limited progress made in promoting looked after children's effective participation in care planning and reviews.

Consultation with children and young people themselves further substantiates these concerns:

> Children and young people are supposed to be asked about their views, wishes and feelings about where they should live. They told us that this was not happening often enough. (The Care Inquiry, 2013, p. 26)

And, perhaps significantly, the government itself decided that it was unnecessary to consult with children over the Children and Social Work Bill introduced in 2016, somewhat bizarrely because the new measures to regulate social workers were not expected to have a 'direct' impact on them (Department for Education, 2016b, p. 21)

Tilting the plane: politics do matter

In drawing together the differing trajectories of recent developments under each of the value positions, we can perhaps discern certain overarching patterns and tendencies which demonstrate a degree of analytical coherence, and a clear direction of travel overall. What these changes represent in conjunction is a 'planar shift' (by which I mean a tilting of the child welfare 'field' (Bourdieu, 1990)

- away from rights and towards social control) in the relationships between the four perspectives outlined above. Laissez-faire and child protection proponents have gained in authority and influence, and in parallel family support and children's rights advocates have been weakened, both materially and in terms of their presence in policy debates.

> What are lacking in contemporary debates are the voices of advocates of the value perspective that Fox Harding (1997) named as defence of the birth family and parents' rights. (Featherstone et al, 2014, p. 1744)

> Why, to date, do we tend to have "child welfare without children's rights?" – without the interests and rights of children front-and-centre. (Waldock, 2016, p. 326)

Taken together, then, the changes outlined above represent the reassertion of authoritarian, statist and hierarchical (patriarchal?) modes of conceptualising, shaping and delivering child care policy. In asserting material claims to resources and decision-making powers, these perspectives (laissez faire and child protectionism) have found common ground and established a shared hegemonic basis for developing and implementing child welfare policies and practice. Whilst they may disagree as to whether the 'family' or the 'child' is the focal point for intervention, and whilst they may also differ over the nature and extent of intervention, they are effectively bound by their shared commitment to coercive, one-sided and authoritarian modes of determining family structures and parental behaviour. Of course, it is pertinent, too, to observe that this unhealthy coalition is also to be found increasing in strength at a particular conjuncture in terms of wider socio-economic developments, such as increasing social inequality and divisiveness. This is no accident. An emerging political consensus, effectively cemented in place with the establishment of the coalition government in 2010, with its commitment to 'austerity' and the withdrawal or reduction of the state's role in key areas of the social arena, readily aligns itself with a particular amalgam of perspectives in child care, which in turn responsibilises families, justifies authoritarian interventions in their lives, and in the final analysis is prepared to take draconian action to remove children to alternative family settings.

This stands in contrast, certainly, to the ethos of the previous government which, although similarly inclined towards authoritarianism was rather more interventionist; and could thus better be viewed as effecting an accommodation between *family support* and *child protection*, with its major investment in programmes such as Sure Start, which at the same time was associated with an agenda of improved parenting and managing risk to children.

Perhaps, then, to end as I should on a positive note, things may change; there must be another way, as eminent colleagues have previously asserted:

> We would argue that other ways are to be found rooted in socio-economic analyses of who gets 'intervened' with and who loses their children in unequal societies and in stories from within paradigms that emphasise families' capabilities rather than their deficits and workers' abilities to cheer on change and encourage hope. (Featherstone et al, 2014, p. 1748)

There is some belief, too, that a number of recent court rulings have sought to redress the balance to an extent and to reassert the principle that as an extreme measure adoption should only be used as a last resort, rather than usurping positive measures to support families (Featherstone and Devaney, 2015).

Can we thus perhaps see some grounds for optimism: firstly, in the resilience at local level of ideas and practices associated with positive support for families, however much this notion may be compromised in the prescriptive form of the Troubled Families programme, or threatened by the shift of influential opinion and resources in favour of adoption; and secondly, in the efforts and commitment of all those who engage actively and positively in pursuing initiatives to listen to the voices of children and families and campaigning to promote their well-being? I hope so.

References

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